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## Exit as Critique: Communes and Intentional Communities in the 1960s and Today

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# Exit as Critique. Communes and Intentional Communities in the 1960s and Today

Philip Wallmeier<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** »Rückzug als Kritik. Kommunen und intentionale Gemeinschaften in den 1960er Jahren und heute«. While social scientists have traditionally confined their attention to practices of critique modelled on collective, publicly visible speech acts, this article draws attention to practices of critique which take the form of individual, private, and mute acts of withdrawal. First, drawing on the pragmatic sociology of critique and its conceptualization of different "orders of worth," it is argued that communards and inhabitants of intentional communities in the 1960s and today practice critique by withdrawing from conventional arenas of political participation and social interactions. Critique is performed through withdrawal because all legitimate channels towards the broad public appear blocked or useless. Second, this study points out differences within this "exit variety of critique" between the two time-periods. The transgressive withdrawal of communards in the 1960s was a radical critique of mainstream society and its values. In contrast, today's communards withdraw from conventional arenas of social interactions to live in ways which more consistently put into practice their beliefs and hence practice a reformist critique of mainstream society's unsustainability and individualism.

**Keywords:** Critique, exit, withdrawal, commune, intentional community, gesture, sociology of critique, Boltanski, USA, 1960s.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 1970 some hundred university students – who had gathered regularly on Monday nights in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury to talk about politics, the enlightenment, or man's relationship to nature – decided to take a trip through the United States together with their teacher, Stephen Gaskin, in 60 buses. After returning to San Francisco, the group did not want to split up again and

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founded the Commune *The Farm* in Tennessee, which still exists today. Founding member Douglas Stevenson (2014, 217) explains that he decided to leave home, job, and family to start a commune because the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy “made it painfully obvious that change would not come from within the system. [...] [T]he revolution was in a new direction, to build an ark that could ride out the inevitable storms of an uncertain future.” For Stevenson and many others, the founding of The Farm was equally a withdrawal from “inevitable storms,” a step “in a new direction” and a gesture of critique towards a system that seemed unchangeable “from within.”

This coupling of withdrawal and critique in the communard’s praxis sits uneasily with our prevalent understanding of dissent: While critique is usually associated with collective action, publicness, and speech, withdrawal, on the contrary, is understood as an individual action, as a private and mute gesture. Were Stevenson and the others misled about their actions and misrepresenting them for ideological or psychological reasons: Is what the communard “subjectively” perceived to be critique, “objectively” just escapism? On the contrary, this article takes as its starting point that we should take Stevenson’s understanding of his own actions seriously. The overall aim of this article is hence to conceptualize an “exit-variety of critique” on the basis of an empirical analysis of the communal scene in the 1960s and today. By “commune,” I refer to a group of adults (and their children) who are not all directly related and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other (more or less) shared purpose (similarly: Sargent 1994, 14–5). This implies that what I call ‘commune’ has also been referred to as ‘communal venture,’ ‘utopian community,’ ‘ecovillage,’ or ‘intentional community.’ I use these terms synonymously.<sup>2</sup>

There is a normative, a methodological, and a diagnostic reason for taking the communards’ understanding of their praxis seriously. First, contemporaries of the 1960s’ communal wave found that student demonstrations were based on a less deeply troubled experience and outlook than the one “expressing itself in quiet withdrawal to rural America” (Veysey 1978, 454). Ignoring those who withdraw may hence mean to block from sight expressions of severe social suffering and moral discontent. Second, dismissing withdrawal as escapism relies on an asymmetrical methodology. The writings of communards testify to their own debates, whether and in how far their withdrawal was an act of critique or just a flight from responsibility. Hence, there is no easy way to establish the final truth on this question as scientific observer (cf. Celikates 2006). Third, more and more people are withdrawing from institutions and the state out of indignation. Whether this reaction is a desirable approach to social con-

<sup>2</sup> While using the terms ‘commune’ and ‘intentional community’ interchangeably, I tend to follow the dominant self-denomination of communards and use ‘commune’ for the period between 1964–1975 and ‘intentional community’ for the period between 2010–2012 (see part 5).

flicts or a promising political strategy is open to discussion. Certainly, however, this trend calls for a diagnosis that goes beyond dismissing these actors as misguided or apolitical romantics.

In order to provide an empirically saturated idea of critique through withdrawal, this article is structured as follows. In a first step, I elaborate on the uneasy relationship between the study of communes and the study of critique (2) and then propose to overcome this difficulty by studying the communal critique as engaged withdrawal on the basis of the “sociology of critique” (3). Based on this conceptual groundwork, I argue that the communal critique of the long 1960s should be understood as a transgressive, radical social critique (4) and that the critique of today’s communes differs from their predecessors’: Today’s communards perform a reformist critique of mainstream society, calling for its transformation into a more meaningful, communal, and sustainable order (5).

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## 2. An Uneasy Relationship: Communes and the Study of Critique

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Much has been written about critique from theoretical and conceptual points of view. Scholars have discussed the function, meaning, validity and normative foundations of critique – focusing especially on the possibilities of scholarly critique or Critical Theory (e.g. Geuss 1981; Honneth 2007; Forst 2013). In contrast to these broad theoretical discussions which Boltanski (2011) calls endeavours in “critical sociology,” the empirical study of practices of critique performed by actors outside of academia, the “sociology of critique,” has been rather limited (but see: Backhaus and Roth-Isigkeit 2016. Adloff and Pfaller [2017] and Schwarz [2017] in this volume even also study expressions of critique that are difficult to articulate and hard to grasp). Systematic empirical research on practices of critique, so far, has overwhelmingly used the terminology and scientific lens of “social movement studies.” While there is greater diversity within social movement studies than can be described in this short paragraph, it seems fair to state that most scholars working within this paradigm focus on acts of critique that are performed collectively, publicly – or are addressed to public authorities – and are expressed in speech – or are translatable into a claim that can be voiced. Famously, Charles Tilly (1984, 306) for example, analyses instances of critique by studying social movements, which he defines as

a sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.

The idea that to study critique means to study collective, public speech acts is not only an accidental feature of social movement studies. It is rooted in more general assumptions about critique that are shared by big parts of the social sciences. As Boltanski (2012, 169) points out, most social scientists build on a “fundamental opposition” between individual and collective acts of critique and “reject as outside their universe of competence manifestations of revolt or grievances whose authors act alone” assuming these are not cases of critique but rather of insanity or pathology, which could be better addressed by psychoanalysis. Hirschman (1985, 31) further observed that most scholars of critique only register collective and public claims because they have conceptually confined their attention to situations in which the only alternative to a collective articulation of critique is “acquiescence.” Recently Hatzisavvidou (2015) pointed out that the “speech-centeredness” of large parts of the social sciences often results in an invisibility of silent gestures of critique.

This may explain, why communes barely feature in the scholarly literature about empirical instances of critique even though scholars interested in communes and intentional communities have repeatedly pointed to their critical sting (two exceptions are: Brown 2002b, Lockyer 2007).<sup>3</sup> The reason for this gap is, as Snow (2004) explains, that the communal critique is barely visible through the lens of social movement studies – the dominant paradigm for studying practices of critique. The communal critique does not take the form of collective, publicly visible speech acts which are directed towards authorities, but rather appears as its opposite – as silent gestures of withdrawal.<sup>4</sup> To make sense of the critical sting of this withdrawal, the next section of this article unlocks conceptual spaces beyond this dominant scientific paradigm for studying practices of critique.

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### 3. The Exit-Variety of Critique

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While the dominant framework for conceptualizing practices of critique does not lend itself well to the study of communes, Hirschman’s (1985) differentiation between “voice” and “exit” as two equally rational and effective reactions

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<sup>3</sup> Bohill (2010, 89) Brown (2002b, 158), Kanter (1972, 3) and Lockyer and Vereto (2015, 7) even use the term “critique” or “critical” to describe communes or intentional communities. Baker (2015), Eräranta et al. (2009), Grundmann and Kunze (2012), Grundmann et al. (2006), Miller (1999), Pepper (1991), Wallmeier (2015), and Willke (1983) attribute a critical function to them.

<sup>4</sup> While some conceptualizations of social movements may be better suited to studying the communal critique than Charles Tilly’s, it seems fair to state that social movement scholars overwhelmingly study practices of critique that are understood as collective and/or publicly visible and/or acts of claim-making. For a more elaborate discussion of how the social movements paradigm misrepresents or fails to capture the logic of the communal critique, cf. Schehr 1997.

to discontent unlocks conceptual spaces for studying the communal critique. Understood as reactions to an unfavourable situation which call for a justification or legitimation, “exit” and “voice” have been called two “varieties of critique” by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, 42).<sup>5</sup> To clarify the difference between the two concepts, Hirschman (1985, 30) defines voice as

any attempt to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through [...] appeal to a higher authority [...], or through various types of actions and protests;

in contrast, exit entails leaving or escaping from an unfavourable situation. In this conceptualization, exit and voice differ on three dimensions (Hirschmann 1986). First, “exit” is an individual action that is carried out in private while “voice” is often collective and carried out publicly. Second, “voice” aims at improving an unfavourable situation, while “exit,” even though it can and often does alert authorities of problems, does not have this overall aim. Third, “voice” needs to pin down specific problems, “exit” does not require such a specification. While “voice” hence refers to practices of critique that are also studied by scholars of social movements, the introduction of an “exit-variety of critique” unlocks new conceptual spaces, the size and shape of which I map in the following.

### 3.1 Exit and the Sociology of Critique

In order to map the shape and size of these conceptual spaces, I follow Boltanski (2012, 29) in defining critique as a process of disengaging “oneself from an action so as to occupy an external position allowing the action to be considered from a different viewpoint.” Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, 36) describe this as a two-level process. On a first level, critique is acted out when a seemingly natural order breaks down and actors shift from a pre-reflexive to a reflexive mode of acting. This shift is prompted by an experience of indignation on the part of the critic or because she witnessed the suffering of others. On this level, disengagement may find expression in a physical reaction like a raised eyebrow, a scream, or bodily withdrawal. On a second level, critique – at least to be sustained over the long run – further requires concepts and schemas which allow the critic to translate her individual and specific experience of indignation into a problem of more general concern. To generalize her suffering, she can refer to different “orders of worth” or “worlds.” These orders are irreducible to each other, and construct collective identities by tying them to an accepted higher common good. By referring to common orders of worth, actors hence establish collectives, exchange points of view and reach momentary and fragile agreements about what is the case in a situation and how to evaluate it. Put simply: They allow the critic to connect her individual experience of indignation to a collective, thus making a claim about what her individual suffering

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<sup>5</sup> Hirschman rarely calls exit and voice instances of critique, but see: Hirschman 1993, 200.



*represents* on a more general level (and what this general level consists of). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 133-8) describe six such worlds, each of which functions according to a particular logic, has its own vocabulary, sphere, objects, subjects, and “tests,” through which the correctness of a claim can be established.<sup>6</sup>

Generalizations in the *market world*, for example, value low or high prices, speak the language of costs, goods, and desires, and can be tested on the basis of monetary exchanges. A person may, for example, criticize a decision because it is not profitable. The correctness of this claim can be “tested” on the market. Generalizations in the *industrial world*, on the other hand, value long-term efficiency, speak the language of science, stability, and correctness, and can be tested on the basis of statistics. Within this order, a person may generalize her indignation by pointing out that an action was poorly planned. Generalizations in the *civic world* value the collective welfare, speak the language of impersonal regulations and equality and can be tested through formal procedures. To criticize an action, a person may, for example, invoke a right. Generalizations in the *domestic world* value personal relations and status, speak the language of hierarchy and family, and accept proof on the basis of personal relationships and stories. A person may, for example, generalize her indignation by pointing to tradition. Generalizations in the *inspired world*, in contrast, value grace and creativeness, speak the language of beliefs and intuitions, and accept proof which is provided through expressive performances. A person may invoke an insight or intuition to criticize an action. Finally, generalizations in the *world of fame* attribute worth to the popular, speak the language of identification and media, and can be tested on the basis of trends. One may, for example, criticize an action by pointing out that other people don’t like it.

Based on this two-level conceptualization of critique, an analytic distinction can be introduced between reformist and radical critique. I speak of reformist critique when critique is generalized by referring to an order of worth which is institutionalized in the relevant situation: e.g. it is criticized that an election was manipulated and thus *unequal* (civic world). A radical critique, in contrast, transcends the situation by taking a totalizing perspective: e.g. representative democracy in general is criticized – even if elections are formally correct (cf. Boltanski 2012, 134). To summarize: critique may take the form of “exit,” individual acts of bodily withdrawal (first level of critique), which have to be generalized in order to become collective (second level of critique). Whether critique is radical or reformist depends on this generalization.

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<sup>6</sup> While the analyses of Thévenot et al. (2000) and Diaz-Bone (2015) include seven or eight orders of worth, in this article I leave open the question whether there is a “green world” or a “network world” and focus only on those worlds which clearly appear to be “grammars of legitimate social bonds in political modernity” (Blok 2013, 493). For an analysis of international politics on the basis of this conceptualization, see: Gädinger 2016.

### 3.2 Studying the Exit-Variety of Critique Empirically

Based on this map of the conceptual spaces which are unlocked through the introduction of an exit-variety of critique, an adequate path for the empirical analysis of the communal critique can be identified. Instead of relying on the terminology and scientific lens of social movement studies – which fails to capture the individual, private, and sometimes mute nature of the communal critique – I reconstruct how *individuals* react to indignation through exit (first level of critique), how they generalize their suffering (second level of critique) and whether this critique should hence be considered radical or reformist.

To follow this path, this article compares the period with the greatest known upsurge of interest in communal living with the situation today. This comparative perspective not only allows me to point out changes since the long 1960s. It also renders visible elements of the normative grammar of the communal scene which would otherwise be easily overlooked.

The comparison is drawn on the basis of various texts written by or about communards, but particularly on an in-depth analysis of the journal *communities*, the largest magazine published by communards and dealing with communes and intentional communities in North America and world-wide since publication started in 1972. Hence, whenever in the following only two numbers appear after a quote, I reference *communities* (issue number, page number).

As part of this research, 28 issues of the journal, published from 1972-1974 and 2010-2012, were analysed in a two-step process. First, the texts from both periods were analysed through extensive reading aimed at finding out, which vocabulary authors used, which topics they touched upon, what they criticized or justified, and which beliefs and tests they referred to. The most relevant passages were highlighted. In a second phase, the highlighted passages were coded according to the different “orders of worth” or “worlds” (which are described above) and a memo was written for each passage, elaborating on the coding. The passages that I quote in this essay are chosen because they are representative of my overall findings.<sup>7</sup> The overall aim of the following empirical analysis is to reconstruct the formation, normative grammar, and sting of the communal exit-variety of critique in the long 1960s and 2010s.

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## 4. The Communal Critique in the 1960s

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In order to understand the formation of the communal critique of the 1960s, it is first necessary to recall some of the socio-economic and cultural features of the era. The 1960s saw the baby-boom generation of the post-war era grow up:

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<sup>7</sup> Methodologically, this essay hence closely follows Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) in their turn to symmetry between actors and scientist and more or less replicates their method of enquiry.

In the mid-1960s more than half of the US population was less than 25-years old (Gilcher-Holtey 2008, 52); the total amount of university student rose from 1.7 Million in 1946 to 8 Million in 1970. Many of these new students came from lower and middle-class families. After the great recession of the 1930s, World War II had again lead to economic prosperity, an increasing demand for goods and services and “Suburbia” was just under construction. These social and economic changes went hand in hand with cultural changes. The 1960s saw an influx of Asian religions through the end of the war in Japan and new immigration laws while new drugs like LSD entered the scene. A critical view of US society, which had already been popularized in the late 1950s by writers of the Beat Generation, contraposed a dead, alienated, and inhuman American society to sex, drugs, and mystical experiences. Increasingly television brought far-away events from Washington and Chicago – the civil rights movement – but also from the six day war in Israel (1967) and especially the War in Vietnam (1955-1975) directly to the homes of millions of Americans. While these developments provided the background conditions for the formation of the communal wave, in 1964 three events triggered its emergence: While the “Freedom summer murders” and the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” spurred anger among the youth, food stamps given out by the government as part of an anti-poverty programme made living apart from one’s family without a job possible (cf. Zablocki 1980, 51).

While it is impossible to provide an adequate estimation of the number of communes that were founded as a reaction to these developments, the trend is obvious: Were there only a few handfuls of communes in the US (and world-wide) in the early 1950s (Oved 2012, chapter 1), Miller (1999, xiii-xx) estimates in his seminal work that towards the end of the 1960s there must have been tens of thousands of communes with 500 thousand to a million people involved in the US alone.

At first sight these numbers seem to indicate that the communal wave of the 1960s and 1970s should be understood as a “social movement,” a collective performance of critique through “voice” in the public realm. In contrast, in the following I show that it was rather a silent withdrawal of a mass of individuals from conventional arenas of political participation and the nuclear family. To make this claim, the following section first describes the withdrawal of individuals to communes as a bodily reaction to indignation (first level of critique) and then focuses on the communards’ attempts to interpret and generalize their individual indignation via language (second level of critique).

#### 4.1 Communes and the Gesture of Critique

The “great communal tidal wave” (Miller 1999, xiv) of the 1960s was a social critique expressed in the bodily movement of more than 500,000 young Americans who left their ‘old life’ behind. The journalist and counterculture chroni-

cler Robert Houriet (1971, xii-xiii) summarized the spontaneous, emotional, individual, bodily and thus “inspired” nature of this simultaneous movement at the time by describing it as “a gut reaction of a generation.” Still today historians use metaphors like “something must have been in the air or in the water” (Miller 1999, 65) to explain the explosion of communes onto the scene. While these explanations are not to suggest that the communes had no precursors – they did, as Miller (1998; 1992) has shown – they do suggest that what at first sight may appear as critique *voiced* in and through “collective action” (associated with the “civic polity”) was rather *embodied* in a silent withdrawal of a mass of individuals from conventional arenas of political participation, from the nuclear family, and from the labour market, pushed out of mainstream society by alienation and pulled by a vision of the new and different.<sup>8</sup> Evidence for this claim is provided in the following: communards were often unaware of each other, the communal scene was disorganized and marked by a fluctuation of people and ideologies so that no stable collective emerged.

First, communards only realized what they had been part of, when the wave was long beyond its peak. There are many reasons for this. People joining communes came from small and large cities, from the East Coast, the South, and the West. Independent clusters of communes emerged in and around specific areas such as Cambridge, Berkeley, Greenwich Village, and the Haight Ashbury, but people in all parts of the country were gripped by the communal fever. Further, most communes were hidden. Still ten years after the emergence of the first big communes, Judson Jerome (1974, 6), a prominent communard, argued that “if you’ve heard of a commune, it’s not typical.” Underground newspapers about communes only had a small circulation. All in all, scholars agree that in the mid-1960s people were experimenting with communal living all over the US while being “largely unaware of each other” (Miller 1999, 65).

Second, individual communes were – except for special cases – not collectively organized according to efficient (industrial world), decent (domestic world), legal (civic world), economic (market world), or noteworthy (world of fame) principles. Rather, communards depended on their *individual* fortune: The internal organization of communes was assumed to emerge organically if people trusted “the flow” (inspired world). This meant that in contrast to most of the earlier communal societies (e.g. the Shakers or Amana Society [cf. Miller 1998]) the communes of the 1960s and 1970s were, for the biggest part, not even close to financially self-sufficient. Most communards spent as little as possible and lived of government resources, donations from rich supporters, or received what was called “love money” from their parents (Berger 1981). Overall, even though individuals often shared with each other what they had,

<sup>8</sup> In this article I refrain from calling the communal scene a “movement” in order to emphasize the individual, mute and often private character of the acts of withdrawal which are described (see: Section 2).

communards depended more on their individual good fortune and “the flow” than on collective organization.

Third, the communal scene of the long 1960s was marked by a fluctuation of people and ideologies. While the terms “commune,” “family,” or “tribe” suggest small, static, closed groups (domestic world), communards lived a rather flexible way of life. Much in contrast to the nuclear family, membership in communes changed on a regular basis. Often it was difficult to distinguish between people who were part of a group and those who were only visiting. Part of the reasons for this uncertainty was that few communes had clearly laid out “admission procedures.” Most so called “hippie communes” even made free movement their mission: whoever came, could stay for as long as they pleased and leave whenever they pleased. Rather than separate groups, the 1960s saw the emergence of a communal scene that was marked by fluctuation and a movement of individuals between places unheard of in earlier communal groups (cf. Oved 2012, 85). Only for very few people in the 1960s the communal adventure was thus an experience of living *one* ideology, at *one* place with *one* specific group.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the communal endeavour of the long 1960s was marked neither by the ideological purity, stability, internal homogeneity, and distinction from an outside of earlier utopian movements, nor by the organization, visibility, and collectivity of earlier social movements. Rather it was marked by economic disorganization, heterogeneous ideologies, and a constant fluctuation of people. Hence, this communal wave should be first of all understood as a mass exodus of individuals from traditional politics, from hierarchical family-relationships, and from the labour market. It was a critical *gesture* that was equally driven by personal feelings of pain and guilt as well as by a vision of a better society that could not be fully explicated in language.

Despite this inexplicable character, however, in order to sustain their critique beyond the moment of overflowing emotions (first level of critique), communards needed to generalize their critique (second level of critique). The following section thus reconstructs how communards interpreted and specified their individual indignation via language in order to generalize it.

## 4.2 Communes and the Language of Critique

An interpretation and specification of what communes were about started taking off towards the late 1960s and early 1970s. Communards engaged in a textual interpretation of their activities while insisting that texts could never fully capture and convey what their inspired struggle was about. The Journal

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<sup>9</sup> The stable and rigidly organized religious or spiritual communes may appear to be an exception. However, even the people who joined rigidly organized religious communes often had been on the move for a long time and rather “ended up” there for some time (cf. Tipton 1984).

*communities*, which is the primary source of data here, is a product of this work of interpretation. Early issues of the journal are filled with anecdotes, visions, and sometimes poems, genres of text which often serve as proof in the “inspired order.” Few articles take the form of impersonal political statements (civic world), or personal stories (domestic world), close to no articles provide proof through numbers (industrial world), prices (world of the market), or popularity trends (world of fame). While the writings do not provide a direct access to the meaning of the communal critique, they allow a reconstruction of how communards generalized their indignation (second level of critique) and hence of the normative grammar of the communal critique.

Most communards in the 1960s describe the situation in the US and their role within it as unbearable. Packing up the most necessary stuff to leave family, home, education, certificates, jobs, and opportunities behind is not described as a rational, thought-through plan. Rather, they emphasize the indignation that pushed them out of “mainstream society”: “We had to leave. We couldn’t take it any longer” (3, 17), we “dropped out of the insanity” (1, 54) are only some of the expressions which are often found. The following passage exemplifies how communards attempted to generalize their indignation through language.

We have all experienced, directly and indirectly, the frustrations and outrage of living in contemporary American society. Our involvement in the wars raging around the world, the rape of our environments, the rampant consumerism, wastemaking, and people exploiting of corporate capitalism, the perversions of technology into weaponry and gadgetry, the violence that characterizes our social relationships, the sterility and irrelevance of our educational systems are only part of our litany of complaints that defines the despair and discontent we feel in a society more open to decorative than to real change. In spite of the inducements of material comfort and the excitement of technical novelties, we are all too aware that our culture is basically death oriented. (3, 2)

As this passage exemplifies, most communards were closer to a scream than to an analysis in their writings. Strong convictions are expressed and the authenticity of their critique is transported by an emotional tone which carries writer and text away, rather than finding expression in it (for this genre of text, cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 298-9). The passage’s explicit reference to feelings such as “frustration,” “outrage,” “despair,” and “discontent” further gives evidence to the claim that most communards in these early years were incapable or unwilling to give their negative feelings a *specific* name. An analysis of the problems that communards are criticizing or a statistic about “wastemaking,” is nowhere to be found. Even discussions about strategies for social change are scarce. These early writings are dominated by their expressive character, as if to say: This critique needs no further proof than to be screamed with the vigour of indignation.

This *inspired* critique is directed at subjects, objects, and figures from different worlds, but often aligns with ideas and values from the civic and the domestic world. In the excerpt above, for example, the communard describes

his feelings on an individual level as experiences made with “our” “contemporary American society.” Emotions thus serve as a direct link between the author and society, between the public and the private. Thereby “the people of America” (civic world) are invoked as both the cause of the identified negative feelings as well as a possible addressee of the writings. It is noteworthy, however, that the author does not invoke American *politics*, but *society* in this context. In this way, he addresses the people as private citizens and a potential collective subject (the people and their general will), but not in the way they are or can be politically constituted here and now as a collective (i.e. through petitions, voting, parties, etc.). The term “litany” – which also refers to a kind of prayer in which a clergyman recites a text and the believers respond in a recurring formula – further underscores this idea of a general will which is not constituted through instruments available in the public realm, but only through the simultaneous expression of peoples’ feelings as individuals. People are assumed to be touched by the grace of deeper insights. In this invocation of “the people,” the civic and the inspired world are hence brought into close contact (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 298).

This list of “frustrations” and “outrages” further brings together subjects, objects, and figures from different worlds and different spheres of life that do not touch in the usual flow of day-to-day activities. The “education system,” which involves pupils, teachers, specific buildings, and books, is connected with “wars,” involving soldiers, airplanes, arms, and strategies, “personal relationships,” involving bodies, gestures, histories, and emotions, “the environment,” trees, animals, and wastewater-cycles, and “consumerism,” involving people, money, stores, and commodities. The list is held together by nothing but the individual indignation which is expressed at them and which involves only private judgements based on the inspired and the domestic world, which can hardly be generalized. While, for example, “wars” are objects of the civic world, they are not criticized in the terminology of international law or democracy, but only indirectly because they are “raging.” Just like “rampant consumerism,” these “wars” are regarded as driven by mad emotions and completely out of control, thus contradicting values such as decency, respect, and the control of one’s feelings (domestic world). Decency and humility are also invoked when the author describes technology as “perverted,” the love and warmth of family-relationships are invoked when competition is characterized as “violent” and leading to “despair.”

In the writings of the 1960s communards, these objects from different worlds were often connected to individual, private, and non-generalizable judgments on the basis of a particular figure which is central to the communal critique: the idea of a rotten and corrupting culture. While the author in the quoted passage does not make any analytical statement about the causes of the identified problems, he explicates that the elements of this “litany” altogether “define” (that is: are part of the necessary expression of) the “despair” he feels.

For the author, the problem is living in a society that is “more open to decorative than real change”; that is: a society in which “technical novelties” and “material comfort” give the appearance of progress while only glossing over the fact that “real change” is impossible because “the culture” is “death oriented.” By equating “material comfort” and “technical novelties” with appearances and death, again the author expresses an inspired critique of “society,” comparing its materialism and falseness to an authentic and pure life. Thus, without explicitly invoking causal relationships, he identifies a particular figure as the root problem: the “death orientation of culture.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to point out that in this interpretation of what is going on in the world, “American society” and its “culture” are contraposed to the mass of individuals, who make up this society; the culture’s destructiveness finds expression in a litany of complaints of the people as individuals who “are all too aware” of what is going on. Hence, while connecting the long list of sufferings logically by describing its common root cause, this generalization at the same time leaves the communal critique somehow fractured. While the people as individuals are described as “aware” of the problems, the collective (“society”) and its political instruments of generalization are described as “defined” (and hence pervaded) by a death-oriented culture. The civic sphere appears blocked to the expression of critique.

### 4.3 Communes and the Praxis of Critique

Communards attempted to generalize their suffering, establish a collective and sustain their critique through textual interpretations of their own activity in many small underground journals, like *communities*. As the analysis above shows, however, the inspired character of this critique made its formalization and institutionalization through text very difficult. Since the communards’ critique built on *individual* insights and emotions, generalizations within the scene never superseded the form of a common “litany” of frustrations and outrages. Attempts at forming a collective through the instruments available in the civic world were mostly discarded since these instruments would also be infected by the death-oriented culture. The only possible collective was hence a mass of individuals following their inspired insights. This individualistic and non-formalized character established at best a very fragile bond between communards, which was constantly challenged from within (and from without).

Evidence for this instability is provided by the often harsh critique, which is levelled at communal practices from within the scene. For example, from early

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<sup>10</sup> Similar to “the culture,” “the system” was also often invoked by communards as a root problem. Often denunciations took forms such as “insane system,” “system of hypocrisy,” “system of hierarchy and competition” (6, 20) or “dehumanizing system” (3, 22). The term “system” (like the term “culture” in the example) referred to the overall circumstances which pervade human activity and lead people in their day-to-day activities, to do things which they know to be meaningless and false.



on, some communards described communes as private, exclusive clubs of white middle-class people (denouncing the domestic character based on civic values):

While the white stockbroker is too busy hustling his money to take time out to move against the war, the white communard is too busy working his garden [...] and both are too busy with their own thing to come to the aid of less privileged non-whites (or poorer whites). (1, 2)

From the opposite vantage point, communards also pointed out that the application of instruments of coordination from the civic world obstructed the “truly inspired” path to social change. A communard, for example, remarks that the promised new society

looks remarkably like the old one with long hair: [...] celibacy and promiscuity instead of satisfaction and pleasure in a total relationship; a priori community instead of a posteriori fraternity; legislated openness; and an honesty that merely replaces slyness as the new manipulative force in the same power game. (2, 43)

Yet other communards criticized this inspired character by pointing out that they felt like “mature adults” and hence were not ready anymore for the childishness of the “regular ‘communal’ project” (1, 58). Last, critics invoked a compromise between the industrial world, the civic world, and the world of fame, pointing out that life in most communes was uncomfortable, that communards had to work hard and that this was therefore hardly a promising strategy to bring about change: “A subsistence lifestyle has meagre social impact and little appeal to most people. We are aiming at social change” (3, 5).

Overall, the communes which emerged in the long 1960s should be understood as products of a mass of inspired, individual gestures of withdrawal based on indignation. While the texts in *communities* are coloured by the insights and feelings which carry their writers away (inspired world), the texts also make reference to values such as decency (domestic world) or justice (civic world) and criticize American society for its materialism (market world), its inauthenticity (world of fame) and its systematic failure (“death-oriented culture”). However, even though communards acted in similar ways at a similar time, their critique was never grounded in a common order of worth, and was not carried by an organized collective, but rather embodied in a disorganized mass. Coordination among communards was not achieved on the basis of a common principle of justice, but rather by the movement of bodies through space: whenever a conflict came up among communards, one was free to leave.

Hence, the communards did not perform a reformist critique of a specific test. In their disdain for institutionalizations, collectively shared orders of worth, or tests, the communards did not even seek justice – if justice is understood as a state in which people can be legitimately ordered according to their worth and not to their strength. Rather, this withdrawal of people constituted an “existential test” in the terminology of Boltanski (2011, 107-8). Existential

tests are experimental performances driven by an experience of indignation, which in their transgression often entail moments of joy. They are expressions of experiences which are “difficult to formulate or thematise,” of indignation that cannot be addressed since the *status quo* does not provide any established formats or even categories to do so. Precisely because they go beyond what can be explicated in a situation, existential tests allow for a moment of exteriority and (at least implicitly) refer back to the limits of what can be said and done. This way they put into question entire situations – the norms, conventions and even the terms in which situations are understood and described on a day-to-day-basis. The communards performed this *radical* critique through individual, physical acts of withdrawal as the early communard Judson Jerome (1974, 57) nicely summarized:

What do people want? Something beyond sustenance and reason, even beyond affection, beyond justice. Just one more rush. Insatiably. Their signals flicker their unity across the night. Already they are bathing the horizon in transforming fire.

The communal critique of the 1960s is hence best understood as a radical critique of the fundamental conditions under which critique could be articulated and of the legitimate instruments to form collectives that were available in the civic sphere.

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## 5. The Communal Critique Today

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“You never change anything by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old obsolete.” This statement by Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome and inspiration to the counter culture of the 1960s, is displayed in the beginning of a movie made by contemporary communards about their network of ecologically oriented communes, so-called ecovillages. This anecdote hints to the continuities and differences in the communal critique between the two time periods, which the following section is about.

While in the late 1960s thousands of communes emerged in one big wave, the contemporary communal scene did not emerge simultaneously and its formation cannot be traced back to specific “trigger-events.” It is thus not surprising that existing communes differ widely in terms of organization and political orientation:<sup>11</sup> There are small rural fully income sharing communities, and large polyamorous communities, in which property is private; there are medium-sized urban co-housing arrangements with monthly meetings, and every-

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<sup>11</sup> For the case of xenophobic communes, see e.g. the exploration of “Private Aryan Communities” (Simi and Futrell 2010, chapter 7).

thing in-between and beyond. To get a sense of the commonalities of this heterogeneous scene, in the following I tease out some differences to the 1960s-communes.

First, the number of communal projects has decreased significantly since the 1960s. In contrast to tens of thousands of communes, in 2016 the *Federation of Intentional Communities* lists 1226 established communities in the US. Their inhabitants are, on average, older than the 1960s-communards at the time, many of whom were in their early 20s and often enough college-drop-outs. In contrast, Metcalf (2012, 24) estimates that the average inhabitant of intentional communities today might be in her mid-40s. Second, since most of today's communards join a commune after already having supported themselves financially, these demographic changes go hand in hand with changes in the economic organization of communes. Few communards today depend on government welfare, many (if not most) have jobs outside their community and are (more or less) integrated into the regular labour market. Many communities have developed goods and services around their way of life and generate an income by running centres for sustainability education, retreat centres for spiritual seekers, or by offering workshops on topics ranging from "consensus decision making" to "the art of tantra." All in all, in contrast to the 1960s-communes, today's communities are financially more stable. This more organized character of the scene (industrial world) is, third, also mirrored in its membership. There is less fluctuation today than in the 1960s. Part of the reason for this continuity is that intentional communities today have explicit acceptance procedures for new members that often take longer than a year. Thus, an outside is discernible from an inside (domestic world). This stability has, fourth, also lead to a better connection between intentional communities. In contrast to the 1960s, today's communards are not only aware of other projects, but mostly connected on a national and even transnational scale (cf. Oved 2012). These connections can be so tight that observers speak of intentional communities as a truly transnational phenomenon (Grundmann and Kunze 2012; Litfin 2009). These transnational connections went hand in hand with a more global agenda of most communards (Litfin 2014). Finally, the described features of today's communal scene are mirrored in its normative grammar and hence in its critique. Most of today's communards prefer to denote their arrangement as "intentional community," "ecovillage," or "co-housing community."<sup>12</sup> They are often weary of the word "commune" because of its "assumed connection with cults, drugs, free-sex, hippies, and crash-pads" (Graber and Barrow 2003, 11) but have equally shunned the terms "family" or "tribe." This

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<sup>12</sup> To be precise, this is only true for the English speaking parts of the world. For example in Germany the term "commune" (Kommune) is used by those communities who share all their income to distinguish themselves from those communities where people "merely" live together (cf. Kommuja 2014).

self-denomination is evidence of a heightened concern about the way communes are perceived by “the public” (polity of fame). On the other hand, it also shows that today’s communards have taken up parts of the critique which was levelled at their predecessors for being dysfunctional, indecent, or unappealing (domestic and industrial world, world of fame).

Since most of today’s communes are hence populated by a clearly demarcated group of professionals, are financially stable, transnationally connected, and concerned about their image in the public, moving to an intentional community is hardly an ascetic performance of withdrawal beyond any normative compromise anymore. Also from the perspective of the public, it does not stand out as clearly from the flow of day-to-day activities, is more easily accepted as a lifestyle choice and hence no longer perceived as an act of transgression. The following sections of this article explicate in which way the exit of people into communes should nonetheless be understood as an act of critique. For the purpose of comparability with my depiction of the communal critique of the 1960s, I again first analyse the founding of communes as a silent gesture of critique (first level of critique), and then consider how communards interpret their praxis in texts in order to generalize their critique (second level of critique).

## 5.1 Communes and the Gesture of Critique

Since joining and founding communes is a much more technical, reflexive, and less experimental process today than it was in the 1960s, its critical sting depends less on the transgressive withdrawal *from* mainstream society and more on the withdrawal *to* a specific setting. Evidence for this claim is provided in the following by explicating some of the dominant features of today’s communal scene.

For example, most of today’s intentional communities have institutionalized procedures to consume less energy and resources. The simplest of these institutions is the sharing of tools, cars, and living space. Many communities grow their own food or buy it through long-term contracts with local farmers so that the energy needed for transportation is reduced (Dawson 2006, 50-1). While some intentional communities use solar panels in order to produce their own electricity, others rely on sewage systems made out of plants which establish a closed water-cycle within the community. Popular are furthermore outside recycling toilets which not only function without the use of water, but at the same time produce new and fertile soil, which can be used for agriculture. The exit of people from mainstream living arrangements towards communes can hence be understood as expression of the desire for the implementation of more sustainability-oriented institutions in mainstream society. The planning and long-term financial investments which have to be put into these artefacts and instruments are further expressions of the communities’ industrial normative grammar.

This industrial grammar, however, is complemented and compromised with the inspired world. Work and planning not only goes into making intentional communities more environmentally sound, but also into the construction of the community itself. This is most obviously expressed in the self-denomination of the groups as “intentional communities”: groups in which a pre-reflexive, fleeting transcendental social bond is to be brought about through careful long-term planning. Planned and coordinated communal activities range from simple neighbourhood meetings, to common meals, consensus decision-making procedures or common child rearing. Community is also the goal of the architectural design of contemporary communities. Entire books explain how a place needs to be constructed in order to invite and facilitate “quality human interaction.” The communard and author of a book about the architecture of intentional communities, Jan Martin Bang (2002, 19), for example, advises readers to build a communal centre from which the different houses and roads within the community can be seen so that people often meet “by accident.”

Overall, the performance of critique by communards today depends less on their withdrawal from city flats and regular jobs and more on the successful organization and implementation of living arrangements which allow people to live more sustainable (industrial world) and communal lives (inspired world). Thus, the bodily, practical character of critique plays a different role today and is more easily translated into language. While the textual interpretation of their bodily withdrawal caused a lot of friction among the 1960s communards – who saw themselves confronted with the task of translating their inspired search for transcendental community into language – many of today’s communards consider this work of explication and explanation part of their performance of critique. How communards today generalize their indignation and which normative compromises are established in this way, is the topic of the next section of this article.

## 5.2 Communes and the Language of Critique

The textual interpretation and specification of what communes are about has reached an unprecedented level today. There are hundreds of books about communal living, ranging from general reflections to biographies, histories of single communities, to the most prominent genre of texts: best-practice guides. This range of genres already hints to the fact that today’s inhabitants of intentional communities less often interpret and generalize their action by referring to individual feelings – “litanies of complaints” – but rather by appealing to scientific facts. The following passage exemplifies this.

In a world of trouble – overpopulation, diminishing natural resources, deteriorating infrastructure, escalating climate risk, and desperation caused by widening economic disparities – the global market economy continues to insist that we define success by maximum consumption. Avoiding the logical outcomes of greed and short-term behaviors will require a high level of local to global

collaboration and innovation. What we need are practical examples that demonstrate our capacity to live lightly on the land, minimize dependency on scarce resources, and creatively share both challenges and joys. (158, 49)

There are important similarities and differences between the critique that is expressed in this paragraph and the one which is quoted above for the analysis of the communal critique in the 1960s. Like in the 1960s, the author provides a long list of “troubles” without any further analysis of their internal or logical connection. Like in the 1960s, the list assembles objects, subjects, and figures from very different worlds: “overpopulation” refers to bodies worldwide, to procreation, and modern medicine, while “natural resources” refers to trees, water, clean air, and “deteriorating infrastructure” refers to streets, train-lines, and so on. These “troubles,” however, are not problematized because of the feelings of indignation they arouse in individuals (which was the case in the 1960s), but rather from a scientific point of view, which is expressed in concepts such as “overpopulation” and “diminishing natural resources,” which reference scientific texts and terms. Hence, this critique is less rooted in individual feelings and more strongly in the industrial world; it criticizes the world for what “objectively” seem to be trends with a negative outlook.

These scientifically established problems are juxtaposed to one of the most important forms of the market world, the “global market economy.” While the author does not imply that the named “troubles” are caused by the global market, it is implied that the market will not solve them because of its driving principle: maximum consumption. This industrial critique of the “irrationality” of the market world is further emphasized by pointing to the desires that drive the market (maximum consumption, greed, short-term behavior, etc.). It is noteworthy that the author addresses “greed” and “short-term behavior” but does not criticize that those feelings are “indecent” or “unworthy” (figures from the domestic world). Neither does he establish an opposition between the “greedy” and those who suffer from “desperation” (a figure from the civic world). Rather, the author points in an industrial language to the “logical outcomes” of “greed,” which have to be “avoided.” To avoid them, we need “collaboration and innovation” (a compromise between the inspired and the industrial world).

This “collaboration” must go beyond the level of the state. While “US society” was regarded as the relevant level of analysis by the 1960s-communards, today “global collaboration” is called for. Thereby this critique skips the institutionalized space of the civic world, in which there are legitimate tests and in which instruments for the formation of political collectives exist. Going beyond the state, the only way for communards to reach a possible “public” are the media. What “we” need – the communard goes on to explain, thus implicating the “citizens of the world” – are “practical examples” (industrial world) that “demonstrate” (world of fame, industrial world, and inspired world) our “ca-

capacity” to “minimize” the reliance on scarce resources and creatively share both challenges and joys (industrial and inspired worlds).

Since this last part touches upon a possible solution to the described “troubles,” it allows for a reconstruction of the normative compromise that is invoked here between the industrial world, the inspired world, and the world of fame. This compromise is held together by the understanding of contemporary intentional communities as sites of “demonstration,” which takes a threefold meaning. First, communards argue that their communities’ efficiency and long-term reliability can be measured and the results of these studies can be used for future planning. In this context, “demonstration site” also means “research site” (industrial world). At the same time, intentional communities are considered sites of demonstration in so far as through them people can imagine a better, more communal way of life. In this context “demonstration site” means place for inspiration (inspired world). Finally, communities can be written about, represented, and identified with through the media and thus from afar. Here “demonstration site” means group to identify with (world of fame).

### 5.3 Communes and the Praxis of Critique

Today’s communards go about their exit in a much more systematic way than their predecessors. While the 1960’s communes often merely appear as the by-products of individual search motions and escape routes, the critique of today’s communards relies on the design of the respective communities and their institutions, on the way of life that is put into practice and on the way this is communicated to the outside world. This performance of critique requires a physical motion of a person’s body to a commune *and* texts which explain this gesture. While the texts inform a public that there is a way of life that is supposedly more communal, more sustainable, and more fulfilling, the communes and people actually living in them figure as proof for these claims. In this way, today’s communards perform a reformist critique that is based on a compromise between the industrial world, the world of fame, and the world of inspiration. As demonstration-sites, today’s intentional communities have become an object in the world of fame that can be known, promoted, and identified with; they have become loci in the world of inspiration through which people envision more fulfilling lives and a different social order; and they have become objects in the industrial world, the efficiency and long-term sustainability of which can be measured and used as evidence in further planning and construction efforts.

It should, however, also be noted that this compromise is not fully closed and somewhat unstable. The critique which is levelled at the compromise from within the scene is evidence for this claim. For example, a communal planner criticizes the inspired, spontaneous, and visionary values of some communards as naïve. He points out:

All too often, people try to form ecovillages without a solid understanding of the legal and technical issues associated with large numbers of people living on the same piece of land together. (156, 22)

For others, on the contrary, the well-planned and comfortable industrial setting of the projects corrupts the genuine, inspired character of the gesture of moving to an intentional community – because of which it is perceived as a gesture of critique:

Intentional communities are a middle class indulgence, not a serious choice for those who are ready to roll up their sleeves and get into the trenches to battle hierarchy, oppression, and social injustice. (144, 6)

Yet others hold against these arguments that today's intentional communities are only critical in so far as they make themselves known. From this perspective, however, it is often the inward-focused, inspired nature of the projects which is problematic:

ecovillages often seem to actively encourage the outsiders' view of them as woo-woo and disconnected from, or unsympathetic to, the wider culture. [...] However, to change the wider world, you need to move gradually from being called weird to being called visionary. (63, 156)

In opposition to this criticism, other communards point to the tension which arises from *too much* publicity. A person living in a community that is regularly visited for educational purposes for example writes that “[l]iving in the middle of a demonstration site means living under observation” because of which “the core group of people struggles to find time for deeper connection” (147, 17). These criticisms, small cracks and tensions within the normative grammar of today's communes testify to the fact that the communal scene is far away from a solid normative compromise. At the same time, they remind us that whether and in how far the exit of people into communes should be understood as critique is constantly negotiated by the actors themselves.

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## 6. Conclusion

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While social scientists have traditionally confined their attention to practices of critique modelled on collective, publicly visible speech acts, this article draws attention to practices of critique which take the form of individual, private, and mute acts of withdrawal. By introducing an “exit-variety of critique,” conceptual spaces for the empirical study of instances of critique beyond the paradigm of social movement studies are unlocked. Based on a definition of critique as a two-level process of disengagement, I show that communards in the long 1960s and today performed acts of critique by withdrawing from conventional living arrangements and conventional arenas of political participation. In both periods, actors disengaged (not least physically) from the dominant social order and its normative grammar and hence occupied an external position to it, thus taking



an alternative viewpoint. It is pointed out that the question whether and in how far this exit constitutes critique is negotiated by the actors themselves.

This discussion and comparison of the communards' praxis in two time periods points to an important characteristic of this "exit-variety of critique." The performance of withdrawal was at both times driven by experiences of injustice and indignation in combination with the perception that legitimate channels towards the broad public were blocked or useless. The 1960s communards found no legitimate way to the public because they criticized the "culture" for corrupting the civic instruments to establish collectives. Today's communards, in contrast, criticize global entanglements and hence consider the civic sphere within the nation-state at best useless for the problems they want to address. At the global level, however, no legitimate instruments to form collectives are in sight.

Next to this commonality, this study also points out important differences within this "exit variety of critique." While the communal critique in the long 1960s was based on the inspired, civic, and domestic worlds, communards never successfully established a collective normative grammar. Their radical critique found expression in a mass of individual acts of transgression, existential tests. In contrast, today's communards leave behind their consumption habits, flats, and sometimes jobs because this withdrawal enables them to live in ways which more consistently put into practice their ideas about sustainability and community. Thus, the withdrawal into intentional communities today is not a radical critique of mainstream society but rather a reformist critique of specific tests. From an inspired perspective, communards criticize tests concerning the quality of life and community; from an industrial perspective they question tests around the efficient and sustainable use of common resources. While this article does not provide an explanation for this transformation of the communal critique, it may be worthwhile to analyse its relationship to the transformation of capitalism in Western democracies described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007).

Overall, this article shows that people turn to the exit-variety of critique when they experience indignation, but have no legitimate instruments at their disposal to articulate and generalize their suffering in order to establish a collective. Given that the international level increasingly influences the lives of people through global competition, transnational corporations, and international organizations, as long as there are no options for the establishment of meaningful collectives at this level, instances of the exit-variety of critique can be expected to increase. Hence, a debate about the conditions of possibility, consequences, and desirability of the exit-variety of critique is needed. For such a discussion, this article has laid some groundwork.

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